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AUTHOR O'Connell, Charles D.
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ABSTRACT

Developments in higher education over the past decade that threaten excellence in education are discussed by a dean of students at the University of Chicago. There has been a tendency to view the chief purpose of all higher education institutions as preparing students for jobs, or for community service, or for some particular societal need. However, there is still an obligation of some colleges to require intellectual mastery from students, independent of social purpose or job skills. The increasing tendency of the state and federal governments not to distinguish among colleges and universities, or between higher and postsecondary education, makes it difficult for the institution that has particular strengths or missions. Claims to special quality are viewed as self-serving and elitist. Examples of such pressures include: attacks on admission testing; the large decline in federal aid to graduate students, based on the argument that the nation has a oversupply of Ph.D.s; and the practice of substituting pass/fail, or no grades, for traditional measures of achievement. In U.S. society there is a preoccupation with quantity rather than quality and innovation rather than progress. It is concluded that if a school does not set its own goals and standards, it will dissipate itself by trying to respond to every issue. (SW)

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NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

Public Hearing
Chicago, Illinois
June 23, 1982

Testimony by Charles D. O'Connell
Vice President and Dean of Students, University of Chicago

I appreciate deeply the invitation to appear before the National Commission on Excellence in Education and to offer testimony. What I shall say this afternoon may seem tangential to the immediate purpose of this particular hearing: college admissions and the transition process. It is not tangential, I hope, to the basic purpose of the Commission which, as I understand it, is to view all the specific topics it may consider in the context of their contribution to educational excellence. The demographic curves, the proportion of men and women and minorities in higher education, the rise or fall in the perceived importance of admission testing, the significance of informed counseling in both the secondary school and in higher education itself, the configurations of support, both governmental and private, for students entering higher education -- these are complex subjects on which a vast array of reliable data has been brought and will continue to be brought, I am sure, to your attention. They are all central to the transition process from school to college. But they are also in a continuous state of change. What is true about them today was not true a decade ago and may not be true a decade hence. What is constant is the need to maintain the quality of the educational experience to which that transition leads.

I have been away from the admissions field some 15 years, even though I share some responsibility for it at my university. My primary occupation today is that of a university dean of students. The longer I serve as dean of students, with major responsibility for encouraging quality and excellence in the non-academic spheres of student life, the more I become convinced that such efforts are futile if we lose sight of our primary goal, the encouragement of <u>academic</u> excellence.

What I should like to do briefly this afternoon, then, is to chronicle a few of the developments in higher education over the past decade that I view as threats to the excellence to which your search is directed.

There are enormous economic, political, and social pressures on institutions of higher education today to dilute or to redefine in any number of ways not simply what we mean by "academic excellence" but, basically, the aims and purposes of our institutions, be they university, college, or secondary school. Most of these pressures are well-intentioned.

The most massive, and perhaps the best-intentioned, pressure has come increasingly from government -- both federal and state. For higher education, the period since World War II, characterized as it has been by the phenomenal growth in the national student population, has resulted in an almost equally phenomenal proliferation in the number and variety of institutions described as colleges and universities. The outpouring of criticism about formal education to which we have been exposed in recent years seldom distinguishes among these different forms of higher education. Part of the criticism has come from young people themselves, as we saw in the late '60s and early '70s. To some degree, the criticism is legitimate and reflects in part our country's tendency to prolong formal education, and in part the enormously high demands that our society has come to place on education. These demands have come at a time of such rapid social change that our traditional institutions, values, and methodologies sometimes seem threatened with obsolescence.

One of the curiosities of this criticism, at least much of it, seems to be that it denigrates <u>all</u> formal education -- at the same time that it seeks to co-opt it for a variety of purposes other than those it has traditionally served. One popular theme of a decade ago, for instance, was that almost any experience a young person can have can and should be viewed as educational and, therefore, our institutional search should be for experiences that are satisfying over the prolonged and painful period between childhood and adult citizenship.

Such criticism produced a report in the early '70s by another government Commission (the 1971 Report on Higher Education by the Newman Commission) that complained that our colleges and universities "reflect less and less the interests of society." It urged that higher education "break free from the conventional wisdom . . . (and) display a sense of reality and a sensitivity to public concern as it recharts its future." It chided higher education for its "failure . . . to give its students a useful and personally satisfying and significant educational experience."

When such views as these -- what someone has referred to as the "rhetoric of innovation" -- become the unofficial but operative policy of the government and private foundations, the inevitable occurs: everyone is expected to do anything and everything, any innovation is held to be good if only because it is different from what we are doing now. To qualify for funding from a federal agency or a foundation, your proposal had to be new, innovative, and a dramatic departure from prevailing methods. And the consequence of that, in turn, was a paroxysm of change, with little qualitative growth.

As social, political, and economic circumstances changed, higher education, and especially liberal education, came in for a new kind of criticism from Washington. Its most conspicuous example was contained in an address given in January, 1975, by the person from whom this Commission has received its charter, Mr. Terrel H. Bell, then United States Commissioner of Education. Commissioner Bell proposed that the "first and foremost" responsibility of colleges and universities was "to provide our students with salable skills." "The college that devotes itself totally and unequivocally to the liberal arts today," Commissioner Bell argued,

> is just kidding itself. . . . To send young men and women into today's world armed only with Aristotle, Freud, and Hemingway is like sending a lamb into the lion's den. It is to delude them as well as ourselves. But if we give young men and women a useful skill, we give them not only a means to earn a good living, but also the opportunity to do something constructive and useful for society,

If a college is to "roll successfully with the times," Commissioner Bell concluded, it must commit itself strongly to the proposition that the acquisition of a "salable skill" is the "first requisite" for "becoming a truly educated person."

The argument proved to have a pleasant plausibility for many people: students, troubled parents, educators, and public officials. It reflected the high value America has always placed on the immediately practical, and it coincided with the general disenchantment with education evident not only in the Newman Report, but in society at large. Witness the best-selling success, for example, of Caroline Bird's book of about the same period, The Case Against College, with its battery of arguments demonstrating that college graduates did not necessarily make more money than those who did not attend college.

Yet it is almost a truism that in our modern society, technical skills are constantly changing, and what is "salable" today -- and therefore presumably to be incorporated into the curriculum -- may be thoroughly outmoded by the time a student graduates, or a few years later. And sometimes the technology itself will so outstrip the student's education that it will no longer tolerate the sloppiness and inexactness of the person who presumes to manipulate it. An article in the Wall Street Journal of May 4, for example, speaks of "college graduates with master's degrees becoming gravely despondent in front of computers that would not respond to their misspelled command, 'Insirt.'" We might be wise to be skeptical of any educational policy that, by concentrating on "salable skills," produces a highly trained but uneducated specialist who, a few years hence may be drawing unemployment benefits. . . a fate commonly reserved by critics of education for the graduate with a liberal arts degree.

The underlying assumption in the attacks of so many critics of higher education in the late '70s was that the liberal arts are a social amenity, little more -- a luxury that neither the student nor society can afford, at least in hard times. And, indeed, if the real purposes of a liberal education were those these critics implied, they would be quite right.

It is not that all of these criticisms are not valuable. They are. They are sometimes even telling. But they almost never speak of the aims or purposes of higher education, and they almost always display a frightening tendency to treat all institutions of higher education as fungible, their chief purpose being to guide young people in some socially or economically useful way through the dangerous shoals of adolescence. Their pre-occupation seems to be with changes in higher education that will better prepare more students -- or, more recently, fewer students -- for jobs, or for community service, or for some particular need of some particular segment of society.

Each of these criticisms strikes a responsive chord in all of us. And many of them should be welcome. But the critics -- whether it is the government, or Caroline Bird, or a private funding agency -- almost never mention the need for various educational institutions to respond in the light of their <u>particular</u> history and their particular purpose. Perhaps it is unimportant -- since history has amply demonstrated that there are many roads to learning -- to argue which institutions of postsecondary education should be grouped under the rubric called "college" or "university." But I see little gain either to forgetting that for some institutions, at least, there is still an obligation to require a certain level of intellectual mastery from their students, independent of social purpose or "salable skill."

Such institutions are perhaps not numerous. They are by no means exclusively private -- or, in the new terminology -- non-public. But the increasing tendency of the state and federal governments not to wish to distinguish among colleges and universities or, for that matter, between higher and postsecondary education, makes it particularly difficult for the institution with some reasonably clear notion of its particular qualities and its particular strengths. Claims to special quality are inevitably viewed as self-serving and "elitist." Whatever the complex admixture of reasons, special quality has come to be regarded as undemocratic and undesirable, and pressures abound to abjure it for some "greater good."

Examples of such pressures abound. Let me cite but three, all of which are inevitably on the agenda of this Commission and will be amply documented:

1. The extraordinary attacks in recent years upon admission testing, with the faintest of lip service to the evident truth that the problem lay with some users of tests rather than with the tests themselves. It took a committee of the National Academy of Sciences, finally, to state the obvious and restore a measure of public confidence in the admissions process.

2. The dramatic decline in federal aid to graduate students, justified in great measure by the argument that the nation has a "glut" of Ph.D.s. The plain fact of the matter is that the federal policy is wholly concerned with numbers of Ph.D.s and exhibits no awareness at all of quality. A more appropriate concern might be that our nation's brightest graduating seniors are deserting the world of teaching and research for "salable skills" in business, law, and medicine. At my own institution, long known for producing "teachers of teachers," 58% of our 1974 Phi Beta Kappa graduates went on for graduate work in the arts and sciences; 31% did so last year. I am sufficiently concerned with quality to insist that there is no danger at all to American society that we shall have an over-supply of the best Ph.D. holders over the next decade.

3. The tendency of the past few years -- with just a few signs of counter-revolution making their appearance -- to substitute Pass/Fail, or no grades at all, for traditional measures of relative achievement. Quite frankly, I have seen none of the good results that were promised for this "bold" innovation when it began to take hold some few years back. I have heard no one maintain in recent years that students, because of it, have taken difficult elective courses with greater frequency than before, or that students have poured greater effort into courses because they had been released from the tyranny of a grade. And if measurement has indeed on occasion proved to be bad, the answer scarcely seems to lie in non-measurement.

But it is not these examples themselves, or others like them, that I mean to emphasize; it is the assumptions behind them: that one college is very much like another, that quantity and variety are what count, and that quality will take care of itself. When a significant segment of society, even including its government on occasion, is preoccupied with quantity rather than quality, innovation and fashion rather than progress, the institution struggling for a clear sense of its own strengths and weaknesses and its own mission in higher education finds the task immensely more difficult. A college or university today is very much what Chase Peterson at Harvard once called a "pinch point" in society, through which "all the issues flood, and flood through with high energy." If a school does not set its own goals and standards, it will dissipate itself by trying to respond to every issue. A former president of my university, Robert Hutchins, correctly referred to insitutional purpose as, in fact, a principle of limitation. And, indeed, if a college or university does not establish priorities for itself, it is likely to succumb to the heaviest or the most seductive pressure.

There are, fortunately, many kinds of excellence. We do not need to rank them in any order of moral or social priority in order to know our own. Each institution must define and seek its own particular form. But it is important to keep in mind that, although personal excellence may be a tough and durable quality, difficult to damage once established; institutional excellence, by contrast, is a fragile thing at best and more than capable of being damaged by unthinking and even well-intentioned pressures.

For this very reason, your Commission brings genuine hope. Part of my hope springs from the fact that a Commission on Excellence in Education has been chartered in 1981 by the man who in 1975 was speaking of "salable skills" as the hallmark of the truly educated person. We hear daily of "born again" Christians. It is encouraging to know of a "born again" educator. The prayers and hopes of many of us in academic life attend your deliberations, and we are truly grateful for your efforts to restore the concepts of quality and excellence to education.